

**A Critique of Julie L. Ozanne, Natalie Ross Adkins, and Jennifer A. Sandlin's:
“Shopping {For} Power: How Adult Literacy Learners Negotiate”**

by Colin Coutinho

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Ozanne, J. L., Adkins, N. R., & Sandlin, J. A. (2005). Shopping {For} Power: How Adult Literacy Learners Negotiate. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55(4), 251-268.

Many Americans are completely unfamiliar with functional literacy, which has recently received heightened attention in adult literacy programs in the United States. This is perhaps most evident in the article, “Shopping {For} Power: How Adult Literacy Learners Negotiate,” where authors Julie L. Ozanne, Natalie Ross Adkins, and Jennifer A. Sandlin provide an analysis of their study which examines functional literacy among adults in the United States. The article emphasizes that millions of adults are functionally illiterate adults, as they are unable to perform critical tasks in everyday life. For example, the authors explain that while a significant number of adults possess a basic level of literacy skills (meaning that they are able to read and write text in their native language), they are often still considered by many educators as functionally illiterate. This is due to the fact that their reading, writing, and analytical skills are still not strong enough to perform a number of important duties in their everyday life situations such as balancing a checkbook, completing a job application, or making purchasing decisions.

In the beginning of their article, Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin claim that the significance of functional literacy is often undervalued. They advocate the need to promote functional literacy by pointing to a study done by the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) which revealed that nearly fifty percent of the US population was found to be functionally illiterate, scoring in the lowest two levels of functional literacy tested. However, the authors also acknowledge that there are some scholars in the field of adult education who are critical of the functional approach, and argue that functional literacy has little to do with worker productivity or consumer happiness. Nevertheless, throughout the article, the authors consistently argue in favor of taking the growing problem of functional literacy more seriously.

The purpose of Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin’s study is to provide researchers in the

field of adult education with a more in-depth understanding of functional literacy. Consequently, their article links the ability of adults to efficiently function as consumers in the marketplace as a fundamental component of functional literacy. The authors stress that the need for more American educators to promote consumer education in adult literacy programs is crucial and would be a major step forward towards resolving the broader problem of functional illiteracy among adults in the United States. Therefore, in their study, they examine how consumers with low literacy skills negotiate in the marketplace and provide new implications for promoting a more effective practice of consumer education for adults.

Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin's comprehensive study consists of in-depth interviews and two days of intense observation at a statewide literacy conference, which drove in data collection efforts. These interviews included twenty-two adults from seven literacy programs, in which each program received a modest financial donation for introducing these participants. These volunteers, who came from a great diversity of backgrounds and possessed a wide range of literacy skills, agreed to participate in an interview lasting between one to two hours. They were asked about their consumer practices before enrolling in the program. These questions helped identify the difference between those who asked for help and those who did not. Through an examination of their interviews and observations of the participants, data analysis was conducted to understand each individual's experience through the use of four conceptual categories, which included perceptions of the low-literacy stigma, identity construction, purchasing patterns, available resources, and negotiation.

Through their interviews and observations, Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin found that there were two dimensions that emerged from the data. There were those who were

empowered and successful in negotiating in the marketplace, as they bought what they needed, fought for their consumer rights, and moved freely in the market. In contrast, the other participants had a more difficult time navigating through the marketplace and were unable to buy the things they needed or voice complaints. From this data, four categories emerged, (1) the *alienated consumers* who accepted the stigma of low literacy and were the least empowered, (2) the *conflicted identity managers* who also accepted the stigma, but were more empowered, (3a) the *identity exchanging* and (3b) the *enhancing consumers* who fought against potential shame and were more empowered, and finally (4) the *savvy consumers* who completely rejected the stigma and were the most empowered.

Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin conclude that their findings reveal that it is how learners deal with the stigma and shame that affected their marketplace encounters findings. They claim that adults with limited functional literacy skills commonly feel responsible for their lack of literacy abilities and accept the stigma that comes with it, which often increases their shame. However, the authors found that the participants most successful at demonstrating functional literacy were those who were most effective at rejecting the stigma associated with low literacy, which suggests that their resilience and self-confidence were the key indicators leading to their success.

In response to their findings, Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin advocate that adult literacy programs should consider a more effective approach to functional literacy, which would encourage all consumers to understand their potential to participate in and transform market interactions. The authors also argue that educators should credit their adult learners for possessing the knowledge and skills that they do have, rather than dwelling on standardized tests that show what they lack. They claim that following these

recommendations will provide the learners with a higher level of confidence, boost their self-esteem, and enable them to reject the shame associated with low literacy.

Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin's article offer some interesting perspectives. They provide an informative history of functional literacy in the United States, how it has been a growing issue for decades, and the great need to promote it in adult literacy programs. In addition, the authors clearly present a strong argument that reading and writing are not the only abilities associated with adult literacy. Instead, they effectively make their case that functional literacy skills are greatly needed to perform tasks in their daily lives such as negotiating in the marketplace and becoming efficient consumers.

While Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin make a strong argument that functional literacy is greatly undervalued by educators and a solid justification for further research on the issue, their research methodology is still weak overall. For example, important factors regarding the participants' history such as their race, gender, disabilities, family history, income, education level, and other issues regarding their backgrounds are not sufficiently analyzed in the findings. While the authors do provide a brief biographical background about each adult, this information is not factored into the study's findings and conclusions. As a result, many significant details are left incomplete. How did adults with developmental or personality disorders fare in negotiating in the marketplace? What impact did issues such as the participants' race, gender, age, income, or family history have on the study's findings? Did the participants' level of education have an effect on how they fared in the marketplace? These are major factors that have strong potential to influence the outcome of the study and also provide valuable perspectives in regards to functional literacy, yet this article clearly fails to address them, leaving many unanswered questions.

Another problem with the methodology of this study was that Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin do not explain what was done to ensure that their findings from the study's interviews and observations are reliable and not due in part to external factors. All studies are accompanied by outside factors that can affect its final outcome and produce results that are ambiguous. This study is no exception. For instance, unlike an anonymous written questionnaire where the participants' answers are ensured full confidentiality, some interviewees in this study may have felt uncomfortable saying what they really thought with a researcher present due to fears of being judged or lacking complete privacy. In addition, while doing the observations, the researchers might have had a difficult time with the complex task of having to accurately record an excessive number of different behaviors and/or having to watch too many different individuals at the same time. As a result of these types of threats, it is easy to see why external variables have strong potential to completely change the dynamics of the study's outcome. However, the authors fail to mention what procedures were employed (if any) to ensure that these threats were eliminated beforehand, so that they did not undermine the validity of the study's findings. This is clearly a major flaw with this article.

Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin's article effectively addresses what functional literacy is, why it is of great significance to the field of adult education, and why it deserves additional attention. They also provide a solid foundation in regards to the importance of promoting consumer literacy as a step forward to solving the broader problem of functional illiteracy. Nevertheless, its potential to become a valuable contribution to the field of adult education is severely limited due to the lack of credibility concerning the study's findings. As previously mentioned, for this study to ensure that the procedures used to obtain its results are reliable and are not due to external variables, the authors

must explain what techniques were applied to minimize these threats to the validity of its findings. Furthermore, important factors involving the participants' backgrounds should also be factored into the study's findings to draw broader conclusions on how these factors might affect levels of functional literacy in the United States. For this article to be considered a noteworthy contribution to the field of adult education, it is imperative that these issues be resolved first.

Reference

- Ozanne, J. L., Adkins, N. R., & Sandlin, J. A. (2005). Shopping {For} Power: How Adult Literacy Learners Negotiate. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55(4), 251-268.